Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

History and Folklore: A Historiographical Survey
Author(s): Peter Burke
Source: *Folklore*, Vol. 115, No. 2 (Aug., 2004), pp. 133-139
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of Folklore Enterprises, Ltd.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30035163
Accessed: 14/06/2014 17:40

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Folklore Enterprises, Ltd. and *Taylor & Francis, Ltd.* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Folklore.*

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded from 185.44.78.129 on Sat, 14 Jun 2014 17:40:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Folklore 115 (2004): 133–139

RESEARCH ARTICLE

History and Folklore: A Historiographical Survey

Peter Burke

Abstract

This article is designed as an introduction to the other articles in this special edition of Folklore. It argues that the relationship between historians and folklorists has undergone three phases: the "age of harmony" prior to the First World War, when both disciplines were in their infancy; the "age of suspicion" from the 1920s to the 1970s, when historians tended to define their field narrowly as the development of the nation-state, and to stress their "scientific" methodology based on contemporary archival documents; and the "age of rapprochement" since the 1970s as historians ventured into new areas—popular culture, micro-history, "history from below"—borrowing methodologies from the social sciences as they did so. And it looks forward to an "age of co-operation" between the two disciplines.

This introduction, or overture to the concert that follows, is not intended to tell the reader what the relation between folklore and the historian should be. It is historiographical, designed to set the scene or construct the context for this special edition of *Folklore* by offering a brief survey of both the communication and non-communication between the two disciplines in the past, looking in particular at Britain but also at other parts of Europe. In order to provoke responses—originally from listeners, and now from readers—I shall divide this overview into three periods, describing them as the age of harmony, the age of suspicion and the age of rapprochement.

Needless to say, there are local variations. In Italy, for example, which has long been marked by what might be called a "culture of historicism," a historical approach was never abandoned and the tradition of historical folklore was passed on relatively smoothly from the Sicilian scholar Giuseppe Pitrè in the late nineteenth century, to mid-twentieth-century figures such as Giovanni Cocchiara, Paolo Toschi, and Ernesto De Martino—a remarkable polymath who was at his ease in sociology and psychoanalysis as well. A similar point might be made about Germany, another historicist culture, from Otto Clemen (1938) and Will-Erich Peuckert (1948), students of folklore in the age of the Reformation, to Wolfgang Bruckner's (1966) work on the social history of images and Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann's (1965) study of the effect of nineteenth-century economic changes on the popular beliefs and customs that Mannhardt had treated as timeless, or at least as very old.

In any case, it cannot be assumed that the two parties, historians and folklorists, changed their attitudes at exactly the same time. The assumption of

ISSN 0015-587X print; 1469-8315 online/04/020133-07; Routledge Journals; Taylor & Francis Ltd
© 2004 The Folklore Society
DOI: 10.1080/0015587042000231237

This content downloaded from 185.44.78.129 on Sat, 14 Jun 2014 17:40:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

symmetry and of fairly precise turning-points that can be labelled are little more than the organising devices necessary to a brief introductory paper. What follows should be read as nothing more than an attempt to sketch a general model of the changing relations between the two disciplines, a model for others to test in their own areas, geographical or otherwise, and to modify whenever and wherever this seems to be appropriate. Generally speaking, I am confident that emphases changed during the period under discussion, but I am equally certain that individual—not to say individualistic—scholars did not always march in step.

The Age of Harmony

What I am calling the "age of harmony" extends from the origins of folklore as a concept in 1846 (replacing that of "popular antiquities") until the 1920s or thereabouts. In Britain the period might be symbolised by Sir James Frazer, a scholar who might be described almost equally well as a classicist, a historian, a folklorist and an anthropologist (Ackerman 1987). His *Golden Bough* first appeared in 1890, and his *Folklore in the Old Testament* in 1918. In 1908, G. L. Gomme published a study entitled *Folklore as a Historical Science* (Dorson 1968, 202–65). On the Continent, one might take the example of the German scholar Wilhelm Mannhardt, whose *Wald- und Feldkulte* (from which Frazer learned a good deal) appeared in 1875–7. Another striking example is that of the Finnish historical–geographical school (Julius Krohn, Antti Aarne and others), which studied variations in folktales over time and from region to region. The approach adopted by the school was described in Kaarle Krohn's *Die folkloristische Arbeitsmethode* (1926).

Disciplinary boundaries were not as sharp in those days as they later became. The German scholar Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, for example, might almost equally well be described as a social or cultural historian or as a folklorist. The same goes for Frederik Troels-Lund, a Dane who made an ambitious study of material culture and daily life in "the North" (Denmark and Norway), published in fourteen volumes from 1879 onwards (Stoklund 1983; Christiansen 2000, 64–76). This enterprise of his coincided, surely not by accident, with the rise of open-air museums in Scandinavia, beginning with Skansen in Stockholm, the result of the initiative of Artur Hazelius (1833–1901), and followed by Bygdøj in Oslo and Lyngby in Copenhagen, museums that were inspired by the displays of folk costume at the Paris Exhibition of 1867.

It is obviously necessary to avoid the temptations of nostalgia. This age of harmony was a time when many professional historians—and history was becoming a profession in a number of European countries in this period—appeared to have little time for studies of the past that were not essentially concerned with the state and the church. The work of Troels-Lund was dismissed by the German historian Dietrich Schäfer on these grounds, for dealing with trivialities. Local history, social history and cultural history were all treated as marginal subjects by the majority of the professionals (Goldstein 1982, 180–93; Weber 1984; Boer 1998). All the same, these approaches continued to be practised, if mainly by amateurs, and their practitioners did not despise folklore.

This content downloaded from 185.44.78.129 on Sat, 14 Jun 2014 17:40:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

The Age of Suspicion

What I call the "age of suspicion" runs from the 1920s to the 1970s or even later. Disciplinary boundaries were becoming sharper. Sociologists and anthropologists developed distinctive methods for studying the present and began to define themselves against their historical colleagues, to whom they now left the past. In England, unlike many other countries, folklore did not gain a foothold in the universities. It was eclipsed by anthropology, especially the study of tribal societies in the British Empire, while folklore depended for support on a voluntary society of amateurs (as anthropology had once depended).

In other countries—Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, the USA, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe—folklorists went professional in the manner of the sociologists and anthropologists, and like them concentrated on the present (defined to include the recent past). The first chair in folklore was founded in Helsinki as early as 1886, at the time of the rise of the historical–geographical school—but, generally speaking, professionalisation was a phenomenon of the twentieth century. Professional folklorists met one another more and more frequently in international congresses (a famous one was held in Paris in 1937). Increasingly, from the 1950s or so, they described themselves as "ethnographers," whether in tribute to the success of anthropology or because the term *Volkskunde* had been tarnished by its association with Nazism, when the cult of the *Volk* led to the official support for German folklore (Jeggle 1988, 114–9). Another alternative to "folklore" ("lore" being rejected as a sentimental archaism) is "Folklife" (or in Scandinavian languages, *Folkliv*).

Even at unfavourable moments, some scholars recognised the need to bring the two subjects together. The famous Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga enquired into popular beliefs associated with the day commemorating the massacre of the innocents (Strupp 2000, 126). In the 1930s, for instance, Lucien Febvre (1962, 607–19) argued that historians had something to learn from folklore and folklorists. So did Gilberto Freyre (1933) in Brazil, in the preface to his classic study of the history of the patriarchal family. And so did the philosopher R. G. Collingwood in Britain, although he did not publish his reflections during his lifetime (Van der Dussen 1981, 184). When his papers came to be studied, a manuscript from 1936–7 was discovered in which the author spoke, as Michel Foucault would do thirty years later, of "a new kind of archaeology," concerned with the recovery and the piecing together of fragments of customs and beliefs.

Scholars with interests so wide that they escape classification either as folklorists or historians ought not to be omitted from this survey. The polymath Ernesto de Martino has already been mentioned, and next to him one might place Julio Caro Baroja, a man of letters equally at home in history and anthropology, and a student of carnival and chap-books, and E. Estyn Evans, a professor of geography whose interests extended to archaeology as well as to folklore and history.

The Age of Rapprochement

We are now living in a third age, beginning in or around the 1970s, which I call the "age of rapprochement." On the historians' side this rapprochement was

This content downloaded from 185.44.78.129 on Sat, 14 Jun 2014 17:40:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

linked to the rediscovery of popular culture and the rise of "history from below." Symptoms of change were the essays on the legend of Mélusine published by Jacques Le Goff and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1971) and the pamphlet on local history and folklore by Charles Phythian-Adams (1975, 36). Not everyone will agree with the conclusion to this latter study (based on Frazer and van Gennep rather than on recent work), that folklorists tend to treat customs "in isolation" while historians also look at contexts, but the author's awareness of the importance of ritual and the festival calendar was unusual in its day (Phythian-Adams 1983, 83–104). As for Le Goff, his interest in what he calls "culture folklorique" and in the work of folklorists is visible in a number of his works, from charivari to popular beliefs concerning purgatory (Le Goff 1967; Le Goff and Schmitt 1981). The enthusiasm for the topic shown by Le Goff's former student Jean-Claude Schmitt is even more obvious, from the choice of topics—a dog venerated as a saint (1981), ghosts in the Middle Ages (1998), or anecdotes told in medieval sermons (Bremond *et al*. 1982), to the references in the footnotes (to Stith Thompson, Vladimir Propp and Hermann Bausinger as well as to francophone folklorists such as Paul Delarue, Pierre Saintyves, Paul Sébillot and Arnold van Gennep). Le Roy Ladurie did not stop at Mélusine, but went on to write a book on money, love and death in eighteenth-century Languedoc (1982), focusing on J. B. Fabre's romance *Jean-l'ont pris* but contextualising it with the aid of folktale studies that ranged from the work of Anti Aarne and Joan Amades to Katharine Briggs and Stith Thompson.

In Britain, my own history of European popular culture in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Burke 1978, 51–2) drew on the work of a number of folklorists, among them such famous names as Giuseppe Cocchiara, Paul Delarue, Vladimir Propp, and the Swedish scholar Carl von Sydow, who discussed the formation of what he called "ecotypes" of folktales, a concept I have tried more than once to use in historical studies (Burke 1998, 8, 42, 147, 176 and 189). The concern with the significance of the calendar is something that British historians from Charles Phythian-Adams to Ronald Hutton (1994) have learned from the example of the folklorists. By the 1990s, British social and even political historians were coming to accept folklore as historical evidence, witness the conversion of Ronald Hutton from the study of Charles II to that of the ritual calendar, or the fact that the use of folklore in David Hopkin's PhD thesis was accepted by the examiners with little more than the raising of an eyebrow.

On the side of the folklorists, obvious studies to mention as evidence of a rapprochement, which probably began earlier in their case than in that of the historians, include the work of Richard Dorson (1968), David Buchan's (1972) monograph on Scottish ballads, Roger Abraham's (1976, 1–10) studies of Afro-American traditions, Henry Glassie's (1982) book on the "Folklore and History of an Ulster Community," and the publications of Tamás Hofer, for instance, on Hungary (Hofer 1984) and those of Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren (1987) on Sweden. The last-mentioned studies, which have made a considerable impression on the English-speaking world under the more glamorous title of "historical anthropology," derive ultimately from the European folklore tradition, which they renew with the aid of socio-cultural theory, so that in the

This content downloaded from 185.44.78.129 on Sat, 14 Jun 2014 17:40:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

bibliography to *Culture Builders*, for instance, we find the names of Nils-Arvid Bringéus, Alan Dundes and Sigurd Erixon alongside those of Mary Douglas and Michel Foucault (Frykman and Löfgren 1987).

Part of the context for this rapprochement is the rise of what Clifford Geertz has called "blurred genres" and of what many people call interdisciplinarity. In this atmosphere it is easier than it was for collaboration between historians and folklorists to take place, not to mention the specialists in literature or visual culture or sociology or the history of medicine, who are also represented in this edition of *Folklore*. The rise of social history in the 1960s prepared the way for collaboration, especially when it took the form of "microhistory" or the history of everyday life, or "historical anthropology." The "cultural turn" on the part of historians has also facilitated the rapprochement, especially the increasing interest in the history of material culture as part of the history of everyday life. Material culture has become a location where historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, art historians, historians of science and even literary specialists all have an opportunity to meet (Appadurai 1986; Brewer and Porter 1993; Miller 1997).

Another facilitator is the rise of "oral history," and also the concern with "social memory," since these approaches to the past are associated with a rehabilitation of oral transmission, oral testimonies and oral cultures; a rehabilitation that does not exclude source criticism, although it has taken a number of years for critical methods to be developed in this sector. To illustrate the rise of these methods it may be instructive to examine successive editions of books by leading oral historians, from Jan Vansina (1965; 1985) working on Africa to Paul Thompson working on Britain (Thompson 1978; 1988, 49, 67–8, 94 and 241; Prins 1991). Both scholars gradually discovered the importance of stereotype and myth in the oral testimonies they recorded, learning to detect versions of folktales and to listen to testimonies as oral literature. In so doing they were, of course, re-entering a field long worked by folklorists. So indeed were Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger when they launched the idea of the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). (For studies of this kind from within *Volkskunde*, see Klersch [1961] and Weber-Kellermann [1965], which would be described today as a "deconstruction" of Mannhardt.)

There is a danger of course that the wheel may be reinvented or America rediscovered. I shall never forget the conference in Denmark in the 1970s at which Le Roy Ladurie presented a paper on the history of folktales, concentrating on "Jean l'ont pris" (elaborated into the book mentioned earlier). Following the presentation, some Scandinavian scholars gently pointed out that what they had just heard, which had been offered as a new approach, was effectively a revival of the methods of the Finnish historical–geographical school.

What is the moral of this story? In my view there are at least two lessons to be learned from it. The story certainly points to the pitfalls waiting for anyone who rushes into a new field without exploring it in advance. In so doing, however, it does not rule out these ventures beyond the frontier, it simply suggests how they might be carried out more successfully. Let us hope that the age of rapprochement will be succeeded by an age of co-operation. The publication of this special edition of *Folklore* suggests that this possibility is now more than a pipe-dream or a pious hope.

This content downloaded from 185.44.78.129 on Sat, 14 Jun 2014 17:40:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

References Cited

Abraham, Roger. "Folklore and History in the Studies of Afro-America." In *Folklore Today: A Festschrift for Richard M. Dorson*, eds. L. Dégh, H. Glassie, and F. Oinas. Bloomington, 1976.

Ackerman, Robert A. *J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work*. Cambridge, 1987.

Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge, 1986.

Boer, Pim den. *History as a Profession: The Study of History in France. 1818–1914*. Translated by Arnold Pomerans. Princeton, 1998.

Bremond, Claude, Jacques Le Goff, and Jean-Claude, Schmitt. *L'Exemplum*. Turnhout, 1982.

Brewer, John, and Roy Porter, eds. *Consumption and the World of Goods*. London, 1993.

Brückner, Wolfgang. *Bildnis und Brauch: Studien zur Bildfunktion der Effigies*. Berlin, 1966.

Buchan, David. *The Ballad and the Folk*. London, 1972.

Burke, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. London, 1978.

Burke, Peter. *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries*. Oxford, 1998.

Christiansen, Palle Ove. *Kulturhistorie som opposition*. Copenhagen, 2000.

Clemen, Otto. *Luther und die Volksfrömmigkeit seiner Zeit*. Dresden and Leipzig, 1938.

Dorson, Richard M. *The British Folklorists: A History*. London. 1968.

Febvre, Lucien. "Folklore et folkloristes." In *Pour une histoire à part entière*, ed. Lucien Febvre. Paris, 1962.

Freyre, Gilberto. *Casa-grande e senzala*. Rio de Janeiro, 1933.

Frykman Jonas, and Orvar Löfgren. *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life*. Translated by Alan Crozier. New Brunswick, 1987.

Glassie, Henry. *Passing the Time: Folklore and History of an Ulster Community*. Dublin, 1982.

Goldstein, Doris S. "The Organizational Development of the British Historical Profession, 1884–1921." *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 65 (1982): 180–93.

Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge, 1983.

Hofer, Tamás. "The Perception of Tradition in European Ethnology." *Journal of Folklore Research* 21 (1984): 133–48.

Hutton, Ronald. *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400–1700*. Oxford, 1994.

Jeggle, Utz. "L'ethnologie dans l'Allemagne nazie." *Ethnologie francaise* 18 (1988): 114–9.

Klersch, J. *Die kölnische Fastnacht von ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*. Cologne, 1961.

Krohn, Kaarle. *Die folkloristische Arbeitsmethode*. Oslo, 1926.

Le Goff, Jacques. "Culture clericale et traditions folklorique dans la civilisation mérovingienne." *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 22 (1967): 780–91.

Le Goff, Jacques, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. "Mélusine maternelle et défricheuse." *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 26 (1971): 587–622.

Le Goff, Jacques, and Jean-Claude Schmitt, eds. *Le Charivari*. Paris, 1981.

Le Roy Ladurie, Emmanuel. *Love Death and Money in the Pays d'Oc*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London, 1982.

Miller, Daniel, ed. *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*. London, 1997.

Peuckert, Will-Erich. *Die grosse Wende: Das Apokalyptische Saeculum und Luther. Geistesgeschichte und Volkskunde*. Hamburg, 1948.

Phythian-Adams, Charles. *Local History and Folklore: A New Framework*. London, 1975.

This content downloaded from 185.44.78.129 on Sat, 14 Jun 2014 17:40:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Phythian-Adams, Charles. "Milk and Soot: the Changing Vocabulary of a Popular Ritual in Stuart and Hanoverian London." In *The Pursuit of Urban History*, eds. Derek Fraser and Anthony Sutcliffe. London, 1983.

Prins, Gwyn. "Oral History." In *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke. Cambridge, 1991.

Schmitt, Jean-Claude. *The Holy Greyhound*. Translated by Martin Thom. Cambridge, 1981.

Schmitt, Jean-Claude. *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*. Translated by Teresa Fagan. Chicago, 1998.

Stoklund, Bjarne. *Folklife Research. Between History and Anthropology*. Cardiff, 1983.

Strupp, Christoph. *Johan Huizinga: Geschichtswissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*. Göttingen, 2000.

Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford, 1978.

Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. 2nd ed. Oxford, 1988.

Van der Dussen, W. J. *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. The Hague, 1981.

Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. London, 1965.

Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison, 1985.

Weber, Wolfgang. *Priester der Klio. Historisch-sozialwissenschaftliche Studien zur Herkunft und Karriere deutscher Historiker und zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft 1800–1970*. Frankfurt, 1984.

Weber-Kellermann, Ingeborg. *Erntebrauch in der ländlichen Arbeitswelt des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Marburg, 1965.

Biographical Note

Peter Burke is Professor of Cultural History at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

This content downloaded from 185.44.78.129 on Sat, 14 Jun 2014 17:40:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions